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# THE ÆSTHETIC IDEAL

BY FR. ROUSSEL-DESPIERRES

*Translated from the French*

## THE ÆSTHETIC EDUCATION

### BOOK II—CHAPTER II—*Continued*

**E**DUCATION it is that realizes the moral and social hopes of all philosophy. So many philosophies, so many systems of education.

The liberty of the Ideal implies an independence of rules of education and teaching. A common ideal would not exclude even diverse and concomitant methods. It is a grave mistake to believe that a uniform way of teaching would be desirable. The statement of Renan who considered it like "an imbruting machine" is cruel and unjust; in fact it would not profit any doctrine, any party, because it would not represent anything but a changing majority, and this would be a menace to every one. Minds which are impatient of the slowness of evolution and of what they call progress can not fail to desire a diversity of educational rules, so favorable to social movement. The complexity and growing specialization of functions in modern life make very necessary this multiplicity in methods of instruction. It is to the liberty of the mind that humanity owes the upward spring of science and the splendor of art. No less than the depth of science does their variety interest directly the grandeur of a nation, since the latter has need of capable minds in all the branches of social activity. Liberty is the grand regulator of the functions of instruction, because it knows how to bend everything to the exactions of society.

But can education, without danger to the social order and national existence be abandoned to these differing directions? An absolute liberty of education probably will never be recognized: in fact, no society could admit an education destructive of the social order. In the actual conditions of the world liberty suffers still very important restrictions; the upholding of national unity is based upon a community of traditions, doctrines and hopes which constitute the very groundwork of all education, for which, without any doubt, the state has a duty to indicate the elements and superintend the distribution among the people. The very delicate task of the legislator is to apportion the minimum of restrictions which interest in the public welfare may impose upon the principle of liberty.

So there exists, then, a common ground for all the systems of instruction. It constitutes one portion of the mass of moral education. Social and civic duties, in fact, count among the number of moral elements in education. Also they dominate the problem of instruction. Education and instruction, however different they may be in principle, are not inseparable in practical life. We educate while instructing and the most solid knowledge is not that which is drawn from books. Education and instruction are like the groundwork and the form of a soul turned over to educators. Knowledge is only an embellishment; whatever Bacon may say, the individual is not valuable "because he knows." All his value lies in his character, his will, his morality, his ideal; and to tell the truth it is these same elements that distinguish his personality and constitute his very being.

It is to this ideal of the individual and social life that methods of education and instruction belong. Political and economical conceptions, therefore, exercise a considerable influence on the choice of these methods; but in return a given system of education implies a renovated society and is the postulate which we may be allowed to admit for the sake of clarity in this chapter.

The goal is, to form a perfect man, an irreproachable citizen, an intelligent co-worker, instructed and zealous for social work, a moral, healthy and happy being.

The first task of the educator would be to fashion the soul confided to him, to put in it love of the beautiful, energy for good, will and ideal—in a word, to make an honest and fine man of the creature of wax that is the child.

The second has for its object the body, which must be rendered robust, flexible and beautiful, in order that the mind should be vigorous and the will powerful.

Next, the educator will employ himself in preparing the child to be a citizen. He will teach him the necessity of social discipline along with respect for all the liberties.

Then, he ought to put in his hands an instrument of production, in order to assure to him the means necessary to life and make a useful co-worker in society; and that would include instruction in several trades; for if the needs of the individual are changing, the social exactions are also mobile and no one should run the risk of becoming useless or knowing not how to gain one's bread.

When he has thus prepared the child for life, the educator has not finished his rôle—man has need of joy and pleasure. In our society the greater number of individuals have no other employment for their leisure than cards, restaurants or melancholy debauches. But some day or other the industrial madness must be appeased; then man will have longer leisure for enjoyment; and this leisure it is the province of art to fill and charm. So that education has for its last task the procuring to each person, for the purpose of making him more moral and happy, one of those pleasurable arts which sweeten the slow hours of rest, the enjoyments afforded by which are almost inexhaustible. The Greeks loved dances, artistic games in the theatres and open gymnasia, and on public squares. A cold climate suggests, along with games and dances in the open air, those arts that form the charm of the hearth and group together a number of performers in great halls.

Let us not hesitate to say: our traditional methods of instruction and education must be radically abolished and replaced. But do we really possess such a thing as system of education? Can we employ the words "method" and "education" with regard to a rule of compression and constant terror? Our school establishments are ruled like barracks—nothing could be more contrary to the idea of educa-

tion than constraint! At bottom education does not signify anything else but persuasion. Our system of instruction is no whit better. Does this system suppose that childhood is reasonable and that one should talk reason to it? or on the contrary, that reason is so widely alien to childhood that one can not begin too early to teach it how to reason? Reason is all rationalistic, critical, syllogistic. The child himself is all sentiment, imagination, enthusiasm. Now this child nature is unknown, and only suspected in order to combat it. All this sap of youth is pushed back. Our children are poor plants whose sprouts people pinch off under the pretext of making men more robust; they can not breathe, leaf-out or flower.

Another mistake: memories are crammed up with facts; they can not hold these facts, and so get rid of them.

Still another mistake: we give a general and uniform instruction for far too long a period, and thus certain avocations are encumbered without measure, while others, not less useful, are full of blanks and call in vain for intelligent workers.

But the universal error and the heaviest in school methods is the absolute subordination of education to instruction. People go a-gunning for diplomas alone; but a diploma does not offer the equivalent of a trade, and still less does it represent a moral education.

No taste for the ideal, no perfection can be expected from a people thus brought up. Everything is to be made over in the matter of instruction. Under the pressure of necessity young people will always acquire professional knowledge; but what they will not acquire any more, when youth is flown, is a character. To form character—that is almost the unique object of education.

Modern irreligion renders this obligation very pressing. The critical principle of our educational system is extremely ancient. It belongs to a political and intellectual régime that has no analogy with ours. It is the most Christian monarchy which has conceived this system. It was based on the religious ideal, and people's habits and pious practices made in some measure a counter-weight to the rationalism of instruction.

To-day instruction proceeds from no ideal whatever. It is first of all that the Ideal will have to be restored in teaching, for it is particularly necessary to the child. The Ideal once found again, and education will march of itself.

Two questions dominate the choice of a method of æsthetic education. Where ought the education be given—in the school, or the family? What shall be the education of girls?

No question but that the true method of the moral education and teaching of children should be family life. Schools should only exist for the highest and most general studies and should be open only to youths and young men. It is in the tenderness and joy of the family hearth, of a truth, that the soul of a child takes its form; there alone can the feeling of affection and generosity, straightforwardness and uprightness of heart develop themselves. Who can give elementary teaching better than the mother? And every father—if indeed the ambition of so many individuals in our society did not consist in raising their sons higher than they are in the social hierarchy—would feel a just pride in

teaching his own trade to his son. Would he not do it far better than any other master whatever? Just think it over: is there not a kind of insanity in confiding the souls of our children to the first person we meet? We abandon to mere chance those first impressions, those fundamental notions which will always rule their thought and designate their moral law. By abdicating the natural task of parents we assume an immense responsibility with regard to our sons and the future generations. That the family should throw from its shoulders the education of the children—that, perhaps, was logical, and at least excusable when teaching was entirely in the hands of ecclesiastics, and when, turning over to them the direction of young consciences, people confided their children, all in all, to the representatives of God. Religious ideals transmitted themselves, always the same from generation to generation. But to-day that there is no traditional and common ideal left, whenever the family loses interest in the ideal of the child it exposes the latter's soul to attacks more dangerous than attacks upon life.

Unfortunately reform in education is subordinated to an economical revolution. It imagines life simplified either by the progress of mechanical inventions (and we may add that society must not profit by this progress lest it multiply to an excessive degree industrial production and its enjoyments) or simplified by the revolt which can not fail to be suggested among all men of any sense, workers or enjoyers, by the exaggeration of labor and production, that abuse of human faculties and life whose weariness is already cutting deep into the character of a worn-out race.

Family education implies the reconstruction of the family, the father enjoying leisure and employing the same at home; and, in order that the father shall be kept indoors, the wife becoming once more the charming guardian of the hearth, bound to her eternal business—the making of the house smiling and the children robust and beautiful. It implies the destruction of thousands of female ateliers; it presupposes a humanity conscious and resolved to purify itself from that social crime—a mother torn away from her children, bound to the twofold homicidal labor of the atelier, which ruins her health and condemns to misery and death those little abandoned creatures, too weak to live away from her! A crime of which we are all mutually guilty, since we enjoy the product of that theft made from the family, crime which perhaps they least of all suspect who get the most benefit from it, namely, rich women, for whose useless and idiotic luxury it is the payment—luxury of such detestable taste and such fatal example! Do they, those at least who are mothers, dream of so many wounded maternities, so many withered childhoods? That is what pays for their fuss and feathers.

But are these women themselves the guardians of the hearth? A workwoman and a woman of the world are two monstrosities in the social order which have appeared at the same time, and doubtless will disappear only one with the other. The modest bourgeoisie and the peasant woman alone are truly women and mothers, accomplishing the sublime destiny. It becomes a great evil when human beings raise a rebellion against the will of nature; and always, just there where the evil appears, a fault is hid—sometimes a crime. In

the young girl æsthetic education has the task of forming a wife, a mother. It is not enough that this education shall fashion the wills, that it shall fill intelligence with the ideal; it will also remake the body; for woman has need to be healthy, robust and beautiful. Physical beauty as much as graciousness of soul constitutes woman's force and the warrant for domestic happiness. Woman is the hearth.

The young girl will ignore none of the holy functions of the hearth, and she particularly it is whom those artistic talents will decorate which some day will embellish the conjugal privacy and will make the house so pretty, so gay, so tender, that the husband and later the sons will not dream of other pleasures than the discreet happiness within its peaceful horizon. A true woman will be more than woman—at times a goddess—always a fairy!

Thus the wife, the mother will accomplish that glorious miracle before which public power hesitates disconcerted, the miracle of causing man to forget the temptations of alcohol and to abolish that social infamy prostitution.

The education of the family supposes an industrial revolution which can not fail to be accomplished. It demands from youths and young girls a complete apprenticeship to the trade of educator in both sexes. So long as the family shall not be reconstructed by the suppression of workshops for women, schools will be needed; but it is necessary that, even in school, education must pursue that twofold purpose of forming young people for family life and preparing them for the reality of an æsthetic existence. Thus, then, it will be based upon a principle radically contrary to that of modern education, which is influenced at one and the same time by religious traditions and the abominable dogma of the struggle for existence. That principle will be feeling. To form a moral being rather than an intellectual being—that will be the goal of education! It will awake admiration, enthusiasm, love in young souls, will cause them to love beauty and æsthetic virtues. As completely as possible it will substitute habits of tenderness and joy in place of morose and severe discipline. To fashion fine souls, that will be to resolve the moral problem! Beautiful souls will know how to love the beauty of good actions. Morality should not be taught with rod in hand. The educator making use of the powerful attraction of æsthetic pleasure will render fine moral habits and noble and generous acts dear to children. He will excite among them a passionate emulation of beauty and morality. Whenever it shall have made true men and true women, education will have fulfilled its social task. Down to our days pedagogues seem preoccupied in particular with imagining expedients to lighten the charge of mothers and the responsibility of fathers.<sup>38</sup>

People scarcely begin as yet to conceive the importance of a rational education. But as soon

as it was appreciated various bold systems were formulated and able methods were submitted for experiment. We shall not examine here the more important of these experiments, which proceed in truth from principles far removed from ours. It is necessary to sketch a little better our own method which has scarcely been indicated.

First of all a word about moral education. The teaching of æsthetic morality has this very particular aspect that, if books are almost useless in it, so counsels hardly play a much greater part. It consists almost entirely in the cultivation of that faculty out of which people have made a sixth sense, namely, the æsthetic sense; and that cultivation is acquired by examples and by the contemplation of beautiful things, works or actions. Moral education is worth only what the educator is worth, the first model offered to the child. Parents, in order to form the soul of their children, count upon the power of traditional morality. They ignore, so it appears, how contagious are their weaknesses and with what responsibility they charge their consciences when they abandon themselves to the bad and ugly leanings of their nature before the eyes of their children. In the æsthetic life the obligation to offer fine examples becomes more sacred still; since, when every constraint is put aside, the instructive value of example acquires that force of which sanction has been despoiled. The master, the professor are no less constrained than the parents to offer children pure models. A child is an imitator; it is also an artist without knowing it, one who exaggerates its model while copying. No æsthetic education possible, so long as the educator is not intimately penetrated by his duty to beauty!

Moral education will include the order of duties and the order of virtues, whose harmony constitutes æsthetic morality. To raise youth to the whole of beauty, to all the perfection which nature can attain, it will form in itself at the same time the mind and the soul, that is to say, the moral faculty and the body. A being is one: that is a principle the educator must not forget.

Education will model itself upon the æsthetic procedure which rises from form to idea, from the idea to the act.

From form, idea and action will disengage beauty, and that, not merely because beauty is the ideal of life, but also because æsthetic teaching is the easier. A reason for this exists in the psychology of the child. The child does not reach up as far as abstraction; the idea of good escapes it; but it is profoundly sensible to beauty. Doubtless the latter at first is nothing to it but the character by which some concrete object seduces its imagination, interests its thought which is still unprecise; but soon enough the idea of beauty formulates itself in the mind. Every child would like to be beautiful; call him wicked, and that will not always touch him; but say to him that he is ugly and vile, and there he is overwhelmed. One may govern a child by this need of beauty; thanks to this very need it can be instructed without trouble.

Æsthetic cultivation will begin with observation of beauties of form; at first in nature one can cause the child to admire flowers, trees, animals, which interest so powerfully; little by little one can accustom him to admire the plastic beauty in art, especially in painting. First impressions of infancy

Note 38.—Extremely civilized societies are the only ones that accord a proper value to the child. Among barbarous and very prolific populations the life of a child, while still useless, has no price at all, and people do not care to trouble themselves so far as to try to make a man of it. That is the education of the wild beast, the cannibal and the prowler of the suburbs. Moral education does not begin until the day the child is finally counted as a person in the house and in society. The more the child gains in social value, the more education becomes thorough.

take so strong a hold of the mind that very soon they cause every kind of ugliness to seem a suffering. Be it well understood that one shall show him only pure and chaste models. I dare affirm that a pilgrimage to the "Victory" of Samothrace, for instance, will exert on a child twelve years old a singularly sweeter and fruitfuller influence than the Catholic sacrament with its following of terrors. Contemplation of the masterpieces of plastic art exerts on persons of all ages a moralizing action. "I would have become better" said Goethe "if I had had under my eyes the head of Zeus the Olympian which the Ancients so much admired!" The habit of plucking the flowers of beauty which expand their petals over all things, that habit changes like some tyranny of love into a constant need of beautiful visions, exquisite harmonies. Then the æsthetic sense becomes so delicate that a physical defect or a moral fault is in his case as severe as a discord at the end of a symphony would be felt by the tense nerves of a musician. It is that very superfine sensibility which makes the magnificence of the Greek soul; even the Spartans, the Boeotians did not escape that despotism of beauty. A king of Sparta, Archidamos it is said, fell into deep disconsideration among his people for having preferred an ugly but rich woman to a poor but beautiful one, and a law in Boeotia condemned to a penalty such painters as those who had made their sitters ugly. We ourselves consider it an infamous act to degrade a work of art. To consent to ugliness is to consent to evil; it is the revelation of any ugly soul, that is to say, a wicked one.

Beauty of ideas, doubtless, escapes a child; nevertheless a work of sentiment will impress upon it a singularly stronger emotion than a beauty which is purely one of form. He is very sensitive to the beauty of courageous acts and generous devotion; the educator will borrow for him the noble models of history, of poesy, of reality. Then he will encourage the child to accomplish such acts, of his own volition. By stimulating the popular imagination with descriptions of frightful crimes our newspapers occasion a great harm to morality; they accustom the soul to spectacles which the habit of æsthetic contemplation would render intolerable to it. Now, morality likewise is above all a habit; it dwells in the mind as well as in the heart. One should withdraw these horrors from the curiosity of youthful intelligences; even pornography offers less dangers.

The collective emotions exercise a deep and durable impression on children even more than on men. That is one of the reasons which have brought certain philosophers to recognize the social rôle of art.

So then, education will not be complete without beautiful festivals which consecrate and fortify by fraternity the emotions, the moral will and the æsthetic aspirations of young people. The delightful imagination of Ruskin has opened up one vista where it would be possible to make a good many other finds. What more graceful festival than that of the Queen of May? or that of engagements to wed? When one reads these charming descriptions one blushes at our noisy and drab-colored festivals, deprived of every symbolical prestige.<sup>39</sup>

Intellectual cultivation precedes and prepares moral cultivation. It assists in forming character

by furnishing the will with the conceptions that the will can put to work. Make the child a personage, a moral being—that is the very end of education! A moral being is a beautiful soul, one instructed in the good and the beautiful, and just as ardent in realizing the same as bold in conceiving them. Audacity in conception, firmness in action: these two essential qualities of the soul that is truly moral, derive, one like the other, from an impassioned and enthusiastic feeling for the good and the beautiful. Moral cultivation consists in provoking and exalting that feeling. It is a method of the intensive expansion of the being. Nothing more violently contrary to the actual methods of constraint and compression! Let us call forth personality, curiosity, passion—the things that people try to suffocate! Urge that youthful will to raise itself, all by itself toward the good, that will which people oppressed by blows, menaces or severe reproaches far more painful to delicate organisms than blows! Morality ought to be all smiles.<sup>40</sup>

How should education, which is our first moral stage, make itself beloved, if itself it does not smile? Love of good is a passion; time should be given to that passion—less fugitive nevertheless than others whenever it remains æsthetic, because we never cease to love the beautiful—time should be given to fix itself into habit. That æsthetic morality should become a habit—that is the most precious result a moralist could hope for; and that is what an educator ought to attain—or else, well, his long effort is sterile.

In last analysis moral cultivation is an apprenticeship to liberty, a liberty without rules, one that will manage itself while turning toward the Ideal. The Ideal defines itself in formulas and we have sketched some of them. The simplest will be proposed first: Love!—admire!—love your parents, masters, brothers, your little comrades! admire flowers, stars, holy families of Raphael and Andrea del Sarto! admire and love Horatius, Achilles, Jesus and Saint Vincent de Paul, and Bara and those humble heroes who enjoy only one morning of glory in the newspaper! . . . Later on we will say to young people: Make yourself beloved and in order to be loved, be beautiful! . . . Later still, at the age when the hardship of life arouse cases

Note 39.—I would like to have presented this book to the shade of the great name of Ruskin. But not knowing English, I only know the thoughts of that illustrious man through the otherwise excellent but in some ways a little brief work of M. de la Sizéranne. I love the enthusiasm of that apostle of beauty, I admire the fecundity of that mind of him, who, even when he contradicts himself, never ceases to be profound nor to charm; and perchance had I known Ruskin better, I should have been content to translate and commentate him. Still, he has not done the work which I think necessary; contemporary æstheticism is made up of unprecise aspirations, of uncertain tendencies. A system still remains to be made. I do not know whether the matter for it can be found in the immense output of Ruskin, but I can scarcely believe so, because that fiery polemical writer was anything but a philosopher. Besides, for my part an infinitude separates me from Ruskin. He hated what I adore—liberty; which in my eyes constitutes one of the poles of the moral universe, of which beauty is the other pole. In morality and in the social life, beauty has liberty for its condition. I can not conceive of art or thought, splendor of soul or virtue, in a world of slaves!

Note 40.—A dragon of virtue is a moral monster.

of conscience, when it is not enough to be loved, when temporary interests disappear before the Idea, we shall then propose to them this more complex formula—one that presupposes a lofty morality: Make yourself worthy of being loved by the most beautiful souls!

Duty, virtue, morality, beauty are the habits. All are based on that habit of the body, health. We have mentioned the intimate unity of the æsthetic development: a beautiful soul demands a beautiful body. Education has traced the principles of moral hygiene, it will also teach a physical hygiene. In what that consists, this is not the place to explain; certainly it will depend very much upon the temperament. It will require for the educator a very delicate feeling for the plastic.<sup>41</sup>

*Note 41.*—Physical education will have to respect the natural plastic of the sexes. Manly plastic and womanly plastic have, each one, their own æsthetic. Effort brings out

the structure of a man; on the contrary the feminine form objects thereto. Woman is visibly not built for effort; her destination is different. Woman is a matrix; it is for her to bring forth, and her function causes her plastic; therefore, the physical ideal of woman will consist in seductive grace.

Masculine games are as contrary to the health of a young girl as to her beauty; the least evil that can be said of horseback exercise, for instance, is that woman is always ugly in the saddle. She is built for the dance, I do not say for our awkward and brutal dance, which seizes upon man and makes him wild. But for the antique dance of the *ancien régime* in which the woman, free and by herself in varied and slow movements, developed all the seductions of her suppleness and form.

Education will strive to inculcate the knowledge and taste for healthy and beautiful movements and a horror for the awkward and heavy poses which deform the body and accustom the mind and will to mediocrity and softness. The educator will not ignore anatomy, and that ungrateful science will offer a singular form of interest to young people so soon as youth begins to find therein the secret of its vigor and its beauty.

*To be continued*

## POETRY

Can any one suppose  
The grafting of a rhyme  
Upon the end of prose  
Makes feeble thoughts sublime?  
As well with scent propose  
To make a weed—a rose!

If one a fragrant rose  
Into the verse entwine,  
It is no longer prose;  
Even the simplest line  
Becomes a singing bird  
With notes before unheard.

A poem is a dream  
Made real to him who hears;  
It is a captured gleam  
From the unseen, that cheers  
And puts the halo's grace  
Around the commonplace.

A glimpse of loveliness;  
A rapture that entreats,  
Though words but half express  
What the mind's eye completes  
While a sweet music sings  
From subtly cadenced strings.

A poem is the song  
All human hearts translate—  
And ne'er translate it wrong  
Though inarticulate;  
And this is its high art—  
It lingers in the heart.

*James Terry White*